

The War Diaries of Dr Charles Molteno ‘Kenah’ Murray

Book 2: The Invasion of German South West Africa

February-August 1915

Edited by Dr Robert Murray

Extracts selected and Endnotes by Robert Molteno

CONTENTS

Walfish Bay: Landing an army – organised chaos	2
The Coast – fog, flamingos and flies	2
Along the coast to Swakopmund	4
Dust storm	5
Advancing across the desert to Haigemchab	6
Our first encounter with German troops	8
Desert landscapes	9
Mt. Langer Heinrich and Tinka’s Flats	10
My horse, Cato	11
The Germans in retreat	12
Stuck in Riet and making the best of it	12
Bird life	13
On the move at last	13
Dorstriviersmund – No more food; I start shooting for the pot	14
Karibib – General Botha’s handling of the German population	14
Some comments on the South African campaign	15
The first aeroplane	18
Kenah surprised at some of the goings on in the South Africa forces	18
German treatment of Black Namibians	19
Windhoek, the capital, at last	19
On to Omaruru – the veld improves	20
The Germans make their last stand	21
Looking back on the final stages of the campaign	22
Etosha Pan – a final bit of hunting	24
Korab near Tsumeb – inspecting the German position	25

24 February 1915 (continued). We camped at Green Point Common¹ awaiting our turn to get away by sea..... Yesterday we embarked on the *Galway Castle*, our horses, mules, wagons and motors going on the *Shonga* and *Erna Woermann* and *British Pruic*, which make up the rest of the convoy....

Walfish Bay: Landing an army – organised chaos

27 Feb 1915. Saturday. Walfish Bay.² We got in early yesterday morning. There was a fairly heavy mist so that we could see nothing of the land, except a fleeting glimpse now and again of low lying yellow sand hills. About 750 of us got on board a tug and a lighter, and were landed at the whaling station. The fog was so thick that we made a bad shot and found ourselves almost on the beach, had to back off and coast along until we found the jetty. From this point we had to walk about 2 miles to the principal landing stages and settlement. As we went along the fog thinned out a bit and we could see something of the nearer land. The beach stretched away in either direction without a break in the smooth brown sand, as far as the eye could see. It is like the beach at Muizenberg, without mountains to relieve the eye in either direction but there is no surf as the bay is almost land-locked - so they say - but it is seldom possible to get an extended view on account of the haze which sometimes becomes a dense fog.

On reaching the settlement, which is just a huge camping ground for the troops and stores that are landing, we came upon a scene of the greatest activity and apparent confusion. There is one fairly substantial landing stage which boasts of a steam crane. There is also another small one where lighter goods can be landed. The horses and mules are brought off in huge "floats" or ponts. These are hauled close in to the shore by crowds of Kaffirs all singing and chanting, gangway is then put over the side and the animals walk down into the shallow water and so ashore. Quite a simple matter, the only trouble being that on account of the shallow water the strips have to lie a long way out....

We lunched with our men off bully beef, raw onions and biscuit, which I must confess I found excellent though some made rather heavy weather of it, as a trial go off. They will all have to get to like it soon. After lunch we went over to the beach to look out for our things. "Floats" were coming in every now and then and discharging masses of equipment from which each commando was engaged in trying to sort out its belongings. A little further along would be another float discharging horses. All along the beach were men bathing and catching soles. These seem very plentiful at times. One supply officer told me they came in in such quantities that they scooped them out in cartloads and fed all the troops on them for 3 days. From the shore the beach goes back quite flat and only just above highwater mark under ordinary circumstances, but when the neap tides come, the water runs back for a couple of miles over this flat. Our horizon inland is limited by huge sandhills like those at Fish Hoek, only no rocks or vegetation, and the sand is of a light brown shade which looks almost yellow in certain lights. The camps have been formed on this flat and here was a scene indeed. Masses of men, horses, mules, oxen, engines, tents, trucks, telephone and telegraph wires and poles, wagons, big guns etc. People going about every direction. Some busy and others idle and all looking very cheerful and well.

The Coast – fog, flamingoes and flies

Maj. Campbell-Watt says he has been here now two months and that the climate is perfect. Very little wind, quite cool and bracing, with delightful sea bathing. The people who live here permanently say that it is like this all the year round. There is a

good deal of mist and fog which really keeps things cool. They have once had heavy rain, but this is very rare. Water has to be distilled from the sea and everything else must be brought from the sea or inland. This morning the sky is clear but the haze round the horizon much the same so that no extended view can be obtained.

28 Feb 1915. Sunday. I saw an account yesterday of the weather conditions at Swakopmund. Amongst them a record of the rainfall. The total for 1912 was 1/10 of an inch while that for 1913 was 3/10 of an inch. This rainfall comes in the shape of fine mist spread over a great number of days, so they really have no rain that can be called properly by that name. The climate is really ideal for a seaside resort. Mild, cool, bracing, no wind.

The bay is so land locked that there are no waves. The beach is so gently shelving and the sweep of the coast so gradual that bathing is perfect. No danger to the most timid and plenty of swimming for the more venturesome. The men spend all their spare time bathing and spearing soles which are very plentiful. When we go to Swakopmund we travel all along the beach. Our possessions are slowly coming ashore, we expect that they will all be landed by tonight. So far we hear that Gen. Botha has pushed in about 30 miles from Swakop. along two routes. At this point they have struck nice country with fine lucerne beds and plenty of fruit and good water. Our orders are to follow up as soon as possible....



General Louis Botha, South African Prime Minister and Commander of the South African troops invading German South West Africa, 1915

2 Mar 1915. Tuesday. Walfish....

This morning we had a short ride. At first we went South along the seashore and across the bed of a lagoon from which the water recedes at low tide. There were thousands of seabirds wading about and among them large numbers of flamingoes. These latter are remarkable looking birds, particularly so when on the wing. Just as they rise the crimson splash on their sides shows up well against the rest of their snow white plumage.

Last night it was really very cold indeed. In spite of my sheep skin bag and an extra blanket I felt cold. This morning has been warm and bright and clearer than hitherto, so that from the tops of some of the sandhills we got quite a good view of the country. As far as one can see with a glass there is nothing but rolling sandhills, with here and there very scanty patches of thin scrub. The sand takes up all the formations that Scott describes in the Antarctic. Even the "Sastingi" are beautifully strewn over

large tracts. I noticed also formations and fantastic shapes which might quite have been the originals of many of his photos to illustrate the varieties of surface encountered. Evidently the subsoil is of a clayey nature and gets mixed with the overlying sand. Result of this is when the wind sweeps the sand along, the clay does what the frost achieves in the Antarctic, forming a sufficiently binding basis, to get the sand to stick together and assume the curious shapes noticed.

Along the coast to Swakopmund

4 Mar 1915. Thursday. As arranged we trekked from Walfish at 8.30 yesterday morning. At first while the tide was low we got along quite well, but gradually we were driven higher and higher up the beach until the whole cavalcade was struggling painfully along in bottomless sand at the foot of the dunes backing the beach. As usual the burghers have taken no notice of their orders and instead of sending all their kit away in the train, they had put a lot of mealies and other stuff on their wagons.³ The result was that eventually the mules could struggle no longer and the officer in charge threw 30 bags of mealies overboard and left them on the beach.

After this we got on better, but even so the first 7 1/2 miles took us 5 1/2 hours. At the end of that time we arrived at a siding called "Rand Rifle Siding" where we had been told to water our animals. But here again we found that our cheery burghers had never made any arrangements to have the water sent on, so that the burghers who were ahead had drunk up all the water before we arrived. So there we were with over 400 transport animals and no water. However by means of the field telephone running along the railway we got a 2000 gallon tank sent out from Walfish.

During the halt van Coller⁴ and I walked some distance out to the top of the highest sand dune and got a splendid view. It was really a remarkable sight. The scene again was quite arctic. Vast plains of white sand stretching away in every direction and worked by the wind into miniature hills, valleys and mountain ranges. Far inland we could make out a range of blue mountains. Of vegetation there was none unless one could dignify occasional very lean little tufts of scrub by that name....

Another four miles of struggling brought us into Swakopmund, where we found our camp pitched by the men who had gone on by the train. Here as elsewhere the only unpleasant thing is myriads of flies. I have never seen anything to equal them. They swarm in countless millions. Our camp stands on the outskirts of the town on the edge of a shallow valley which is the mouth of the Swakop River. The water came down a little while back for the first time for many years. Under ordinary conditions the river like most on this coast, loses itself in sand long before it reaches the coast. Landwards there stretches a huge sandy plain devoid of vegetation while the horizon is bounded by high mountains many miles inland, some say 80 miles but they don't look quite as far away as that....

5 Mar 1915. Friday. Swakopmund. Yesterday afternoon and this morning we have been into town and had a look round. It is quite a large town with many fine buildings. The curious thing to me on first seeing the place was that all the streets are left as they were, just soft deep sand. One would have thought that with expensive buildings, water and electric light laid on the Germans would have paved the streets

with either wood or stone. As it is they have contented themselves with laying wood footways on either side of the principal streets and narrow gauge railways to the various parts in the middle of the thoroughfares. These are no doubt convenient in a way but an abominable nuisance to any other wheeled vehicles.

There are lots of private houses which are all well built and splendidly furnished throughout. Very nearly all the buildings in the town have now been allotted to the various units stationed here. It is curious to walk into fully furnished houses and find men camping out everywhere. It appears that the Germans quitted the town in great haste leaving everything just as it was. They must have done this when the place was shelled by the *Armadale*. It was then unoccupied by either side except for a small patrol who were evidently left by the Germans to fire the various mines they had planned. During this time the coloured population in the neighbourhood seemed to have looted the place and done a great deal of malicious damage to furniture etc. Evidently the few German soldiers here used summary measures as at one spot outside the town where our men were making a blockhouse they came on the freshly shot corpses of 19 natives. It is supposed they must have been met by a German patrol coming away with loot. General Botha is living in a fine looking house overlooking the landing stages.

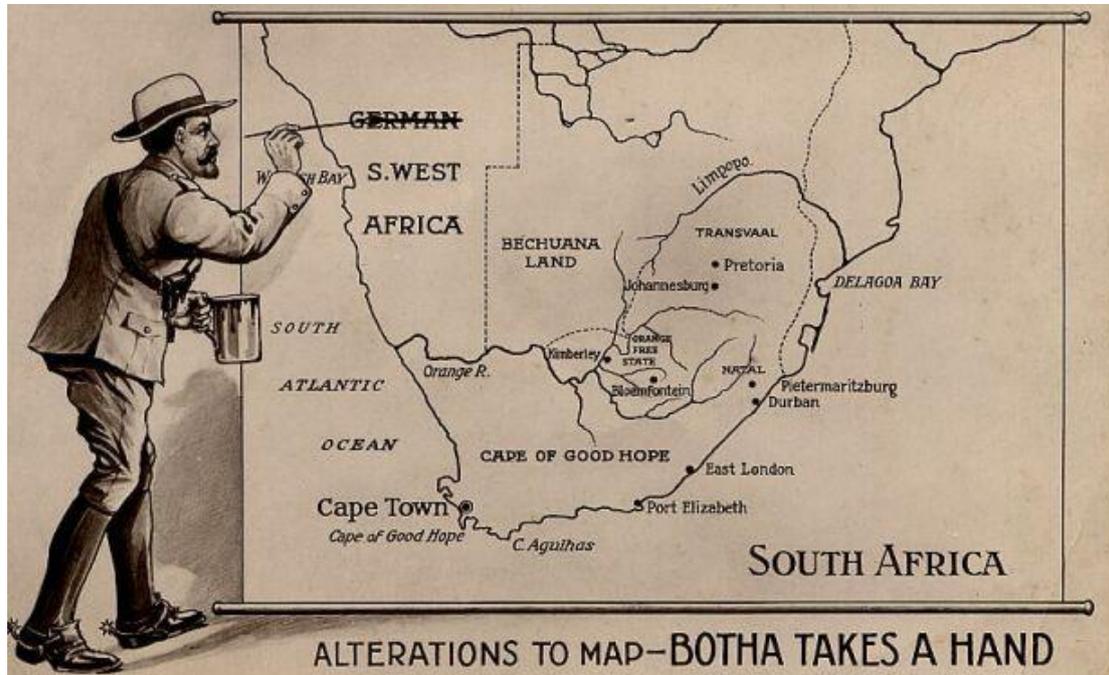
The landing arrangements are very elaborate consisting of twin piers running out into the surf with enormous cranes for lifting the goods. These big cranes are carried on one of the piers which is still in course of construction and to be used solely for the cranes to move along. These were apparently wrecked by the Germans before they left. In spite of all their preparations the surf which rolls in on this unprotected coast is so formidable, that ships have been known to lie off for as long as 42 days before they could complete discharging all their cargo. Though the weather has been calm ever since we were here, the swell rolling in has never made it possible for anyone to land on the pier unless they were exceedingly daring and active. The water supply of the Swakop comes from boreholes in the river and is horrible. It is very brak and tea and coffee is miserable. There are rumours that we push on early next week....

Dust storm

8 Mar 1915. Monday. Swakopmund.... Today we have had a horrible change in the weather. The night remained warmish which has been quite the contrary up to the present, and as morning broke in a fiery red sky, it got hotter. Then a few puffs of wind and very soon, quite the worst dust storm I have ever seen, came tearing down on us. The wind was burning hot and the temperature rose rapidly until it registered 108 in the shade and 138 on the sand on which we are encamped. It was awful. The tents began to blow down and cooking became impossible. Van Coller and I put our goggles on and beat a retreat into the town where we had some work to do and remained there until near lunch time when we faced the "blizzard" once more. All we could do in camp was to creep into our tent which threatened to blow down every moment and munch a biscuit. There being no abatement later we went off again and had a dip in the sea....

11 Mar 1915. Thursday. Swakopmund.... In connection with the heat on the 8th I was examining my clinical thermometer today and found it had risen to the limit and

then the bulb burst. So I asked van Coller and Edmeades to examine theirs and we found that all confirmed a temperature of 110. These thermometers were all in our tunic pockets hanging on the tent pole which therefore represents the heat in the coolest and most protected spot in camp....



Cartoon of the political significance of South Africa wresting South West Africa from German colonial control, 1915

Advancing across the desert to Haigemchab

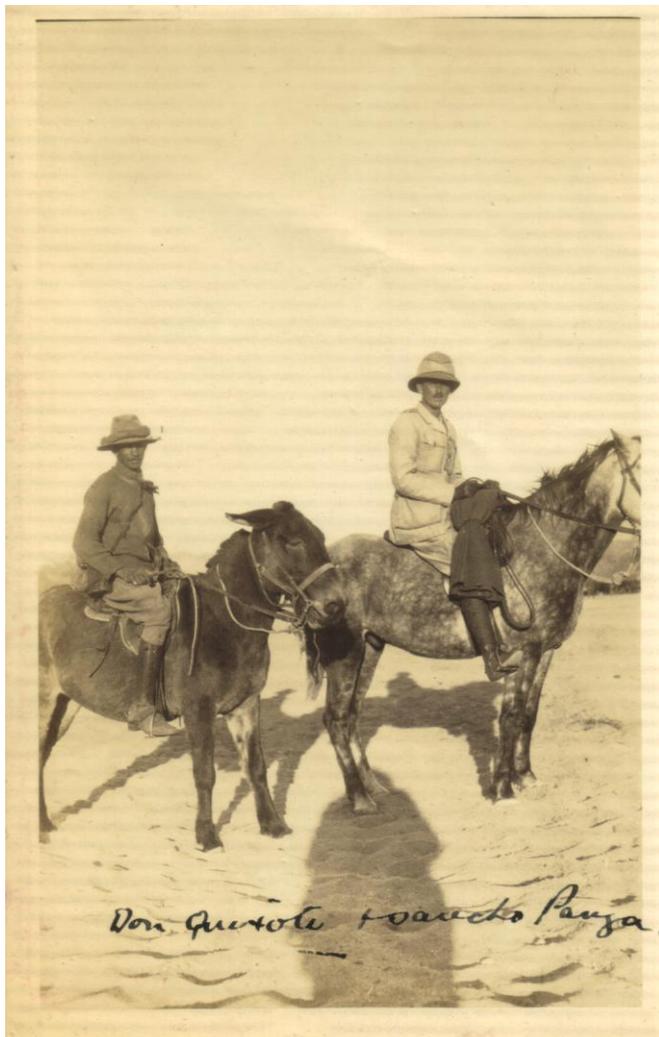
19 Mar 1915. Friday. On trek. We left Swakopmund at noon yesterday. We found it imperative to leave a good deal of our outfit behind. This included all the men's kit except one change of clothing and one blanket. Also all tables, benches and camp furniture together with 10 of our bell tents. We had devised loops of stout rope to lash on to the motor wheels for the sand and these proved a great success as with an occasional shove from the men our motors were able to struggle through the first deep stretch of sand and are I believe the first cars to get out without being towed by animals.⁵

Our first stop was at a place called Nonidas on the Swakop about 7 miles out. About 1 ½ miles out the surface became much harder and the going quite good. After watering our animals we started off again and have been going all night. It was quite clear but no moon and as far as we could see there was nothing but sandy desert in every direction. At about 5am we halted where we now are at a sort of subsidiary supply depot not far from Haigemchab. Here the Rand Rifles are encamped. There are a considerable number of troops moving up.

It is curious to see the motors forging along over the desert. The surface is just hard enough to make it possible to get along. Motorcycles do marvellously well. No sand seems too deep or surface too rough for them. One hears the hum of the engines and

then a little convoy will go flying by scattered over the desert, twisting and turning and skidding as they sort out the best ground to go over. The car speedometer registers 25 miles. We go on again soon.

20 Mar 1915. Saturday. A deal has happened since my last entry - to continue in order. We trekked on from Haigemchab at about 11.45 and got into Husab about 2 p.m. Here we found a huge straggling camp. The waterhole was about 4 miles down a gorge and a fearful struggle going on to get the thousands of animals watered.... At 7 p.m. a message came that we were to be ready to trek again with as light equipment as possible at 8pm and carry enough food and forage for two days. We were told to move towards a place called Riet. Van Collier decided at once to move forward with 4 out of our 6 amb. wagons taking 12 mounted men so that we should travel light and have the maximum carrying capacity. The rest of the Brigade was to remain at Husab to cope with any wounded sent back and pass them on to the coast. It was about 9 p.m. before our mules returned.



Dr Kenah Murray with the man who served as his batman - 'Don Quixote and Sancho Panza'

we found that we had camped not far from some transport, which was comforting as it showed at any rate we were on the right road.

The next difficulty was that no guide was provided nor could we find anyone who could do more than give us a general idea of the direction. "Keep the Southern Cross on your right" was about as near as anyone seemed able to tell us. So with the help of my electric torch we floundered clear of the camp. There was no moon. Once out van Collier and I skirished about until we found a spoor leading S.W. across the desert. With the mounted men strung out behind us to guide the wagons we moved slowly forward until the spoor became more defined. It was a curious feeling to strike out across the desert in the dark in a new country and in the neighbourhood of the enemy, not knowing for certain that one was sure of the road being the right one. This is a typical instance of the way in which our highly mobile and irregular army goes to work and I trust will not lead to disaster. At about 11.30 p.m. we decided to outspan and rest our mules, and after doing this

Our first encounter with German troops

At 5am on the morning of 20th we trekked on again, and not long after dawn saw the General and his staff striking camp in front, and as it grew lighter still the dust raised by the Brigade could be seen. We had been travelling across an immense flat toward a big granite mountain and now we saw that the road turned down to the left of this mountain and dipped into a wide valley towards the river. The burghers⁶ had no sooner begun to go down when the Germans opened fire with shrapnel from some big guns away down in the valley. We remained on the crest of the valley watching the troops spread out to attack. The Germans were firing very badly as their shrapnel was bursting from 200 - 300 feet up in the air.

Presently we made our way down into the valley and placed our wagons under cover of a ridge while van Coller and I with one wagon and 4 men went forward to where we heard a man had been wounded.... We kept along the road while the German guns were delivering a heavy fire of shrapnel at the sandy ridge behind which the larger part of our force had left their horses. By turning down to the left we took the wagon right down behind the ridge close to where our guns were stationed. Having got the man on board we remained where we were as there was some risk to the wagon in returning.

Our guns are under command of Toby Taylor who was Capt. of our Soccer team at Pembroke in my year.⁷ He managed to get his guns under the tail end of the ridge shown, only 950 yards from the German guns and out of their sight so that they did not know where the fire was coming from. We arrived just before the firing began and got a splendid view from over the top of the ridge.

The fight opened by the driving in of the German outposts and an attack on the rock ridges ... from which the burghers drove the Germans with rifle fire. It was after this that the guns took position. After a few shots our guns found the range beautifully and one after another the German guns were silenced. Their gunners must have had an awful time and the beauty of the whole thing was that they never could make out our position and kept firing right over our heads. While this was going on our burghers were working their way in on each flank. Some splendid work was done by them on both wings as the Germans had such a magnificent position and such splendid cover that only very few of them were seen all day. About 3 in the afternoon we saw a horseman gallop out from behind the German guns toward the road and presently one of the gun limbers came into view making for the road. Our guns immediately opened and a shrapnel shell plunged right into the limber knocking over the whole team of mules and as we found afterwards killing one of the drivers. The Germans then brought up another team which was also wiped out and one of the drivers killed.

23 Mar 1915. A lot of rifle fire followed till dusk and as we left the scene of the fight we saw the dust rising in rear of the German position and then later followed a most tremendous explosion followed by a blaze. During the day we collected 8 wounded and 7 deaths were reported. The next morning the Germans were found to have cleared out and we went forward. On reaching the position of the German guns we searched for wounded and found 3 severely wounded and one slightly injured by a

fall. In our search there was every evidence of the haste with which the place had been left. There were about 150 unfired shells and several boxes of unfired cartridges. Also all sorts of personal kit, medical stores, etc. While there were signs of all sorts of stores wine, beer, and meal having been destroyed. We have got a fine supply of medical stores and a nice officers tropical tent. The German position was most wonderfully strong and had all sorts of natural advantages. Directly behind the guns was a deep gully which led down to the bed of the Swakop eventually. It was by this means that the guns had been got away and it was evident that the unfortunate limber had been sent out as a decoy to draw our fire while their guns were being withdrawn down the kloof.

25 Mar 1915. Thursday. The Germans had had their camp all along the kloof behind the guns and in the larger one into which this debouched right away down to the Swakop where there was a waterhole. Along this were strewn all sorts of equipment the useful parts of which such as stretchers, dressings, medicines, tents, we gathered up for our own use. In searching the following day behind the guns a shallow grave was found with 3 bodies, but the task of going deeper was so unsavoury that the men pursued their investigations no further. At another point the remains of a man was found who had apparently been struck by a shell, the only recognisable part being one leg. So it is evident their losses must have been considerable. Our scouts also captured an amb. train with 4 corpses on it but allowed it to proceed to its destination. Last night van Coller got orders to return to Swakopmund as the bulk of our Brigade is returning there until the transport and supply arrangements have been got into good working order....

28 Mar 1915. Sunday. We are gradually getting news of what happened to the 2nd M.B. They left Husab the same night as we did and divided into two columns. One under Col. Alberts and the other under Col. Collins. Alberts attacked Jackals Water which was held by about 300 Germans and Collins attacked Pforte where there were about 200. Alberts captured nearly 200 Germans and 2 guns and 2 or 3 Maxims, but Collins seems to have made a mess somehow, and lost about 30 or more men either killed or captured. But taken all round and considering the positions held by the enemy our total success has been very excellent....

Desert landscapes

As far as the fighting goes the Germans have very little chance, as we outclass them in all branches in the field. Our only enemy is the country. Hitherto I have had no time to say anything about the country and must take the opportunity now that we are resting to say something about it. After leaving Swakopmund we only trekked about 9 miles by daylight. At this time we passed through barren hillocks, the surface of which was simply disintegrated quartz mostly like coarse granulated sugar and giving a very fair travelling surface. During the same night we seemed to cross an immense flat with the same sort of surface but even firmer and the going quite good apart from the dust. When morning dawned we found ourselves still among endless sand dunes to the South but about 4 miles to the North kloofs led down to the Swakop. On the opposite side were the most weird and wonderful looking rugged hills and small mountains. These were cracked and scored and blistered to an extreme degree and present an example of the utmost possible desiccation. They seemed to be composed

of granite mostly white seams of quartz and an almost black looking fine grained rock ran in fantastic lines across the landscape. The picture was one of utter desolation.

This same country was maintained until we reached Husab at about 2pm. Here the camp was at the head of a valley leading down to the Swakop. The bottom was broad and sandy while the kloofs leading into it all round the head and sides presented the most wonderful examples of desiccation of huge masses of granite. The bottoms of these kloofs were soft and sandy with the results of the disintegration. The whole effect was of a huge amphitheatre with little antechambers leading off all round. In these were ensconced the various small units, like ourselves, the various Colonels and their staffs, Headquarter staff and so on while the main force lay in the amphitheatre. As we left again at nightfall and trekked all night we saw nothing of the intervening country.

Here we lie in the bed of the Swakop. All round are still the weird and wonderful worn granite kopjes while to the South is Langer Heinrich, quite a considerable and very rugged granite mountain. The formation on the last part of the plain before reaching this valley was worthy of note. It was quite flat, but the surface instead of being covered with fractured quartz was closely and neatly packed with smoothly worn quartz pebbles varying in size in certain areas, but wonderfully even in size in any given area. Mostly they varied from the size of a pigeon's egg to be either a little smaller or bigger. They were nicely packed and looked as if they had been finally rolled with a heavy roller, so that on looking down the general effect was that of mosaic work.

As far as one can see ahead the country is still very rugged and similar in character to what we have passed. Here and there in the kloofs one sees some very drought resistant scrub, but the bushes are very few and far between and seem mostly to belong to the fat stemmed small leafed varieties found in arid regions. There is no doubt it is a most remarkable part of the world and one in which the student of Geology would have unlimited scope for the study of the effects of desiccation in the extreme. The whole face of the earth is blistered and scorched until it looks like nothing I have ever seen or imagined before....



The Northern Black Korhaan, found in Namibia (former South West Africa)

Mt. Langer Heinrich and Tinka's Flats

4 Apr 1915. Sunday. Today Capt. Redlinghuis and I went for a scramble on horseback along the slopes of Langer Heinrich. This is the most prominent mountain in this region and lay on our right flank during the engagement of Riet. We struck a game path which took us all along the top of a rugged ridge through wild and desolate looking foothills, with deep gorges on either side. Wherever there was the smallest bit of level ground we found the holes made by zebras for rolling. The only living things we saw were some small birds, dassies⁸ and a pair of the brown korhaan⁹ found in the Karoo. The path at the

end of 2 1/2 hours, brought out on to one of the shoulders of the main mountain and from this we got a magnificent view of the country around and particularly ahead. Beyond an increase in the growth of trees in the river bed up towards Salem, there was no improvement to be seen in the country ahead. We had a fine view of Tinka's Flats over which Commandant Bezuidenhout had ridden many miles in an endeavour to outflank the Germans in Riet. As a matter of fact the path over the hills which he ought to have come by and did not find passed over the foot of the shoulder we were on and was the one by which we eventually returned.

From our point of vantage we also had an excellent view of Modderfontein and the country towards Jackals Water. We could see the railway line¹⁰ winding up a sandy kloof from the Swakop at Riet and ascending by a long gentle slope to the higher flats of Modderfontein and on to Jackals Water. This piece of railway had been laid expressly for the defence of this position, and its existence was quite unknown until the day of the attack. The Germans had indeed taken a lot of trouble and have undoubtedly lost a magnificent chance of holding us back, by failing to hold such a wonderful natural fortress. I don't think there can be many other positions where their chances will be anything like as good.

My horse, Cato

One pleasing result of our ramble was that in spite of his somewhat clumsy appearance I found old Cato is quite a handy man with his feet. I have called my horse Cato because not only is he a most splendid old philosopher but he is a bit of an orator too. He always has a friendly word to say when he comes across other horses or is rejoining his friends. When he rests he does so thoroughly. If the night is warm he lies down full length with his head resting on the ground and goes sound asleep. The night before the attack on Riet we had not had much rest for 36 hours when we lay down to sleep on the road for a few hours before dawn. When we had to go off again I went over to the wagon to which Cato was fastened and though it was rather chilly I suppose he was pretty tired and I found him full length fast asleep. I took him by the ears and gave his head a shake, at which he raised his head with a groan, but did not get up, as much as to say "Good heavens!! Are we off again?". I then gave his ears another pull whereupon with more grunts and groans he got on to his feet, gave himself a good shake, quite clearly indicating "Well if it must be, I'm ready". Then if I fall back along the line - and ours is a pretty long one when the whole brigade is on the move - to see that all is well, as soon as I start forward he will give a loud neigh and two or three more until I get back to van Coller's or Edmeades' horses, who are his friends. He is quite a character and carries me easily and well and is docile and quiet and not easily scared by anything. If left loose for a moment or two among any group of wagons, it does not take him more than a very few minutes to find where the food is. No matter what it is in he soon finds how to tip it out or pull open a bag or even bite a hole in it if the worst comes to the worst. So, take it all round, he is a splendid fellow for a campaign, and I hope when it is over to manage somehow to keep him....

The Germans in retreat

10 Apr 1915.... The news from all sources indicates very clearly that the Germans are clearing out of all the Southern regions, and either massing what troops they have to resist our Northern force in our next advance, or possibly retreating still further North into what I am told is a high mountainous region....

Stuck in Riet and making the best of it

18 Apr 1915. Sunday. Riet. Now the Field Hosp. has its full staff. We have been helping them to settle down and as the rough of the work is now over I have moved out and camped further up the River. I have found a splendid place under the shade of some very fine trees. The commonest kind of tree here is a sort of huge mimosa. They are really very fine and afford quite good shade. There are also a few wild fig trees, like those I have seen in the Tugela Valley. The fruit is more like a green loquat to look at, but is a real fig. Very sweet and full flavoured but quite dry and free from juice, so that they are not pleasant to eat. These trees grow to a huge size and have nice clean pale stems and very beautiful dark green foliage, the leaf being small and rather like a mulberry to look at. There are also kameeldoorn trees,¹¹ but they do not grow to nearly such a size as the other thorn trees. The bulk of the shorter trees and scrub is wild tamarisk, such as one sees along the Orange River. Today is exactly a month since we marched into Riet....

19 Apr 1915. Monday. Riet. Very hot again today. Have spent quiet time in the shade of my big thorn tree reading and writing. A wire at midday from van Coller to say he can't spare motor, and is sending ambulance wagon instead. Replied that this will not help. At the present time our scouts go out anything from 20 - 35 miles and to attempt to get so far out with anything but a motor would be impossible. I am faced too with the problem that two of our patrols might have casualties simultaneously in quite different directions and then it would be case of rendering no aid at all to one, with only one motor to do it with. The motor ambulances have already proved themselves of inestimable value and I only wish now we had more of them. I have wired to Colonel Stock today to say how well we can do our work with motors and urging more to be sent forward in place of wagons.

20 Apr 1915. Tuesday. Riet. Another blazing hot day with high wind in the forenoon and much dust. Flies are getting very numerous and most persistent, so that things have not been too pleasant. I am writing by lamp light now. The evening is balmy and very still and from that point of view all that could be desired. But as soon as I lit my lamp a perfect shower of insects both large and small began to bombard it, and it requires no small amount of perseverance to go on writing in this shower of beetles, moths, mosquitoes, flying ants, and all manner of curious things that are showering down. Some of them bite too and all of them tickle abominably as they walk over one's head and down one's neck.

I have had no further word of the motor ambulance today, but have done all in my power to get one sent out. One always had an idea that in war and where men's lives are at stake a request for urgent help would be promptly attended to. But no such luck. My wires have gone unheeded for 5 days, on any one of which we might have

had a call to succour wounded, quite out of reach by animal transit. In Swakopmund or near vicinity there are today to my certain knowledge no less than 5 if not more motor ambulances doing nothing. And here where they are urgently needed I have with difficulty retained the one I am entitled to....

23 Apr 1915. ... Unfortunately mule haulage is no use whatever at the present instance, when the only casualties likely to occur will be 30 or more miles out, with no water to be had when you get there.

27 Apr 1915. Tuesday.... On Friday 23rd a German patrol of 4 men visited Jackals Water. There is a waterhole about 1 mile from the camp there (where there are now about 700 of the S.A.I.) and it appears that one of the engineer corps was sleeping near this hole and saw these men come in but being 4 to 1 was afraid to do anything, but lay in hiding. The Germans rested about 1½ hours and then went on right into the camp before they were noticed. They would even then have all got away had not this prisoner's horse gibbed at the firing with the result that he was made prisoner. I have often remarked that whereas passwords, sentries and all the circumstances of war were most rigorously in force in Cape Town, they have become of less and less consequence, the nearer we have come in actual touch with the enemy. Up to the present all our schemes have to my mind showed the utmost contempt for our enemy. We have treated the Germans as though they were children, and perhaps have been justified in doing so, as they have not so far taken any advantage of our slackness....

Bird life

28 Apr 1915. Wednesday. Riet. ... Since I moved away from the hospital and came to camp out away from all the other camps under these great thorn trees, I have been able better to observe the bird life. There is really a very large and varied assortment. There is a flock of 8 or 10 slate coloured cockatoos. They are about the size of the white fellows with the celery top, but their "top" is made of fluffy feathers and fuller than the ordinary cockatoo. They have a loud squawking cry, and are not very beautiful to look at. Another bird that has interested me is a very beautiful little wood pecker. He has a nice cosy fitting coat striped transversely with dark and light brown, while his head is capped with a neat fitting little cowl of vermilion. He creeps about rapping round worm holes in the dead branches on the tree above me, until presently some unlucky worm looks out and is gobbled up. There are all sorts of others that I have never seen before. There is one friendly looking fellow like a large jay in build, but with black and white marking instead....

On the move at last

1 May 1915. Saturday. On Trek. On Thursday we got orders about sundown to tell us to trek at 9pm. We left at that hour in the glorious light of a full moon in a clear sky. The mass of transport was so great along the road that our 1st stage - to Salem - which was only 5 miles from our camp, took us no less than 5 hours. On the way we smashed the back wheel of one of our G.S. wagons. Fortunately we have just had a farrier attached to us and he and his mate were able to fit the wheel of another disabled wagon to ours, and catch us up later on. From Salem we trekked on up the

Swakop all night, in deep sand, but through lovely surroundings. Granite kopjes on either side and under the shadow of immense thorn trees in the river bed.

By 4.30am I called a halt and after a cup of coffee had an hour's sleep, trekking on again at 7.30. About 11am we reached Dieptal, but found no water so trekked on for another hour and then outspanned in nice little grassy kloof alongside the river, but still no water. On we went again. It was now getting hot and I felt very sorry for our poor animals. By 3pm we reached Horibis where we overtook our Division. There was still no water so we started to dig in the river bed but were most unfortunate going 17 feet in one place and 10 in another without striking water. After sundown we managed to water our animals by making use of some holes made by the burghers higher up....

Dorstriviersmund – No more food; I start shooting for the pot

2 May 1915. Sunday. Dorstriviersmund...¹² Our camp site at Horibis was quite the most beautiful we have yet struck. At this point the river bed was about a mile wide, and except just where the water occasionally runs there was quite a lot of grass and weedy growth. Dotted over the width of the valley were little groups of the most enormous thorn trees I have ever seen. Under one of the biggest of these we made our camp in beautiful shade, and if it had not been for the anxiety about water, nothing could have been more delightful than this beautiful spot. There was lots of animal life. Pheasants were plentiful and all sorts of beautiful birds, while just at dusk a small buck ran down the river bed, not far from where we sat....

We have no more food left now for men or horses beyond what we have been able to save from our former rations, and when I think of the difficulties of transport I am wondering where our next supplies are coming from. We have had all our animals out in the kloofs today picking up what they can in the way of grazing but it is very very little. This morning I got my rifle out for the first time, and went out just before dawn. I was fairly lucky, as I had not got more than about 400 yards up a kloof when I saw a steenbok which I managed to shoot. We had some of it for lunch today and though tough for want of hanging it was nice to get some fresh meat....

4 May 1915. Our way again led up the river bed and after trekking for a couple of hours reached Bullolout. Here there was a fine farm where a large orchard of date palms was laid out on a stretch of river bed. We rested all day.... After this halt van Coller and I ranged out into the veldt to try and get some shooting. Quite close to our halting place we came on the fresh spoor of a lion while there was heaps of spoor of all sorts of buck and large antelopes. We saw quite a number of small buck, hares and Korhaan, but no large game. Though we persevered for 4 hours we got no chance of a clean shot at any of the small bucks we saw....

Karibib – General Botha's handling of the German population

9 May 1915. Sunday. Karibib. On awakening on Thursday morning we found ourselves quite close in to this town.... I think all the inhabitants were extremely nervous as to how we were going to treat them. I suppose they expected we should

treat them as their countrymen have done the Belgians and billet our soldiers on the townsfolk and levy a war contribution from the town. As a matter of fact General Botha called them all together and told the men that they would have to surrender all arms and ammunition and give their parole and otherwise they are permitted to go their way. No one has been allowed to come into the town¹³ except by special permission and only those buildings are being made use of which are government property or are not in use.

This is quite a fair sized town with good buildings. There are 3 large hotels and some quite fine railway buildings and stores. The people are very short of provisions, and many things like jam, salt, tea and coffee are almost finished. There are about - so I believe - 50 men 100 women and 150 children. The military had left them 2 bags meal, 7 bags rice and 36 bags mealie meal and this they reckoned was to suffice them for 2 months. They have plenty of meat and good butter and I suppose milk - though we have seen none yet. The altitude is 3845 feet and the climate seems very pleasant. Just like the Karoo. Most glorious fresh bracing mornings and then inclined to be hot, but not unpleasantly so....

Yesterday evening v.C. and I went out in the motor to hunt for pasture and took our rifles. We saw 4 springbok and had a long shot. There were lots of Korhaan and a fair number of steenbok and quite a number of wild ostriches. As we were not successful in shooting any buck v.C. bowled over a fine cock ostrich, which we gave to our native drivers much to their delight. Food is still very scarce. For 5 days we had no issue of rations at all except ox or goat, while the animals had to do what they could with the very scanty pasturage. Meat, with not even salt for several days on end is rather short commons and men were offering 1/- a piece for a biscuit from those who had been providential enough to horde up a few against an emergency....

The forces that went by that route, detached a commando to come over this way. These report that they passed through some glorious country. They describe it as some of the best country they have seen in Africa. Splendid grass, quantities of fat cattle and sheep, and lots of water. These people only suffered the inconvenience of living entirely on meat as we had done but did not have the added disadvantages of no water and very scanty pasturage.

Some comments on the South African campaign

When one views the whole move up here it has been rather remarkable. The time occupied was 7 days and this was accomplished on 2 1/2 days rations for men and animals through a desertland for most of the way. Even on arrival here, there was no certainty of anything and as a matter of fact there was no food to be had for the men as a whole for two days until a couple of wagon loads of biscuit and dried fruit came through. So really the men have gone for 9 days on 2 1/2 day's rations. Several engineers have been found here and this morning the first train came through bringing a little more food, so now we may hope that some fodder will be brought through soon for the animals, who have only the poorest of grazing as a reward for their arduous trekking.



Kenah Murray (left) in camp in Klein Auchas, 1915

13 May 1915. Thursday. Etiro. For the past 3 days since my last entry we have been resting at Karibib. Rations are still very short indeed and one feels lucky to get even 1/2 rations, while the wretched animals have to be content with such grazing as they can get and the issue of a stray pound or two of fodder. We were informed that the force would not move from Karibib for about a month, that during the interval 30 of the troops were to be sent back and the remainder organised for the finish of the campaign. So everyone began to settle themselves down for a prolonged stay. To this end we searched round the town and hired a room from one of the townsfolk. No sooner had we moved all our things and made our arrangements, than an order comes that we are to be ready to trek at 7 pm on the 12th. The Brigade was to move on in 2 wings of 500 picked men and animals in each.... However later on the Brigade Major came over and told us the astonishing bit of information that we were to return to Karibib in the morning as "General Botha had wired that he did not approve of this forward move". This is I think about the finishing touch to a casual campaign. Just fancy a move of this magnitude having been planned and put into effect within the command of a General without even acquainting him of their intentions. Just picture a General having given instructions for a Division to reduce its strength by 30% and reorganise and remain at a certain place to do it and then find that it has planned a fresh little campaign all on its own account, and put it into effect. The whole thing is grotesque and Gilbertian. I do not wonder General Botha has peremptorily ordered us to return....

24 May 1915. Monday. Aukos.... I saw a tin house ahead. As we drew nearer I saw the spoor of horsemen. The horses were shod with German shoes and had passed along the road since the motor had done so the previous day. When about 400 yards away I saw the smoke of two fires and as so far the German patrols had always fired

at sight on our men I thought it wise to see who was there, so we struck into the bush until I caught sight of a native, and then I knew there were no Germans about as the natives are escaping from them in small batches regularly now....



Captain Kenah Murray goes in search of a lost motor car, Klein Auchas, June 1915

Our camp lies on the edge of a vast swelling plain covered with stunted thorn bush which is very sparse, but viewed from a distance looks quite dense. The soil is mostly sandy and quite bare, as all the grass or rather such grass as there was is now quite dead and gone. Just here and there in the bottoms of slight depressions one comes across a little dry grass or possibly showing signs of once being green. Even in the most further [favoured?] spots it only grows in very scattered tufts. The bush is just high enough to make it impossible to see anything more than a few hundred yards in any direction so that it is well nigh impossible to locate anything like a cart or wagon which you might

wish to make a base for the days hunting. During my long ride after the motor I saw any quantity of spoor of Kudu and Gemsbok but never saw any of these animals in any part of my journey.

Yesterday v.C. and I went out again on horseback. We left camp at 5 a.m. and rode straight out to the waterhole which we reached about 8 a.m. Here we rested fed and watered our horses and then pushed further out intent on getting at least a Gemsbok if not a Kudu. However we had no such luck for though we kept going till one o'clock we never saw a single head of game of any sort. We then rested a while and turned homewards. At about 2 p.m. I spotted a single springbok, just in time to stop our horses in a slight "loopje" or shallow water course (of course no water in it). We left the animals with our two "boys" and going forward carefully found ourselves between 300 or 400 yards away from a large herd of springbok. We got up to 300 and started firing. The shooting is very difficult as one only gets a fleeting view of the animals as they dash through the bush. Most of the herd did not know where we were and so the

whole lot became confused, with the result that we each put in about 7 or 8 shots before they finally disappeared. After it was all over we picked up 3 dead buck and then when ranging round I came across another which I also shot. We now each had a buck on our horse so we made towards home....

The first aeroplane

28 May 1915. Friday. Aukos.... Early on Wednesday morning we heard the hum of an aeroplane and saw one of our long expected machines coming in from the West. Our people seem to have been rather unfortunate up to the present as none of the machines have been a success. This one however is a fine bi-plane and was expected to be able to overcome most difficulties. When it passed over our camp it was flying at a great height, and with a glass appeared to have two men in it. We shall all be curious to see to what degree it will be able to help us with scouting in a country like this, when distances are great and the people in it, few and scattered....

Kenah surprised at some of the goings on in the South Africa forces

There seems no penalty whatever for the non-fulfilment of orders, beyond occasionally a mild remonstrance for the senior officer. Everyone in consequence from the highest to the rank and file seems afraid to take up a firm line, so that discipline is certainly absent. Men will disobey orders and insult and even strike their officers without there being any penalty inflicted. As an instance of the general sort of mix up among the force, Capt. MacGregor (the parson) was asked by our Wing Colonel to join his mess. The mess consists of the Colonel, his 2 brothers who are burghers (privates) another man who is a sergeant, and the cook. The cook prepares the food and puts it all on the table and then all including the cook sit down together. A few days ago the Captain who was adjutant to this same Colonel was one of those sent back home. He (the Captain) had a younger brother (who was the sergeant on the Colonel's staff) so the difficulty of filling the place of the departing Staff Captain was easily overcome, by making his young sergeant brother staff Captain in his place!! Imagine in an ordinarily constituted military force, the feelings of the other dozens of officers thus passed over!!

However this is typical of the manner in which the whole thing is run. At the beginning of the war the Captain in charge of the Brigade Train (transport) attached to our Brigade, engaged a man as one of his conductors with rank of Sergeant. A little later on this Sergeant was removed to another unit and promoted. By the time we began the campaign here in G.S.W. the ex Sergeant had risen to Major!! and is now in command of all our Transport and incidentally the C.O.¹⁴ of the Captain who originally took him on as a conductor, and so on it goes. The whole system of Commandos is rotten, being purely a political arrangement of men supposed to be engaged in warfare. A couple of weeks ago a man was court-martialled for sleeping on outpost duty. It was a long time before his C.O. could get a court together and when he did they merely said the man must not do it again! This for a crime which might have meant the loss of hundreds of lives of his comrades. For minor offences the usual thing is the imposition of a fine, but it is apparently no one's business to collect these fines so of course they are never paid....

German treatment of Black Namibians

1 June 1915. Tuesday. Aukos. A propos of a rather gruesome photo in this (May 21st) week's *Cape Times* which shows 3 of de Meillon's scouts hanged in a tree by their German captors, I forgot to note a point of interest in this connection. There is a native location at Karibib just on the precincts of the town, and in front of this stands an old thorn tree very much like the one in the photo and this tree is used for the same purpose. From a branch hangs a wire noose. The condemned man stands on an empty carbide tin with his head in the noose. The tin is taken away and he hangs by his neck until he is slowly throttled. This is all done publicly and is the sentence for quite trivial offences. The natives told us one of their number was thus put to death, just before our arrival for stealing a bottle of rum. The Germans seem to have acted very brutally towards the natives, with the natural result that the natives are against them now....

We reached the Jahu River at Etiro at midnight and owing to our recall, spent the day resting and waiting for the ambulance we had sent on ahead for the wounded. During the morning our Brigade Colonel rode out some distance ahead, and as everyone was tired with the night trek, they all did as is their usual custom - went to sleep without posting any sentries. In the meantime a German patrol of 4 men rode into the camp with the intention of surrendering. When they arrived they could find no one awake !! and even those who may have been were too slack to take any notice. After wandering about for some time they stumbled on the Brigade Adjutant, whom they also found asleep, and roused him to surrender to! This sounds almost incredible more particularly in that we were at the time advancing to the attack in quite new and unscouted country, but it is exactly what happened and exactly in keeping with the casual way in which things are done throughout....

3 June 1915. Thursday. Aukos. We are still lying here, with every prospect of remaining where we are for another couple of weeks. The railway is gradually getting into better working order and we now have a fair quantity of supplies for the animals, though our ration has resolved itself once more into plain and unadulterated bully beef and biscuit. The bully is of very poor quality too. Very old, lean and dry.

Windhoek, the capital, at last

10 June 1915. Thursday. Windhuk.... The whole day we journeyed over a vast plain, slightly undulating with small undulations and covered with thick thorn bush and quite a fair show of grass in parts. We saw a good many farm houses and some of them very fine ones. There is quite a considerable town at Okahandja, with fine buildings. Most of the buildings are in white and red shades, and done in quite good style.

Apart from the interest of seeing new country the journey was very tedious. There is no more coal to be had and the engines are driven with wood fuel. This means that steam pressure can only be kept up for a short while, the engine then having to rest while the steam is got up again. Owing to this and delays in dealing out supplies to the troops along the road, we did not reach Windhuk until the early hours of

Wednesday morning. On arrival we went over to the nearest hotel and were luck in hitting on quite a nice clean and comfortable place....

The town is quite a big one, stragglng along the course of a dry river which winds around low rounded kopjies studded sparsely with thorn trees of stunted growth. Quite a number of little villas and not a few pretentious mansions are dotted over the kopjies on either side. On the Western side the hills are lower and more sweeping in contour and over these are scattered several large native locations, while to the East the kopjies are higher and more abrupt, and are the sites for the European suburbs. The new houses in the residential portion of the town are perched on top and all over the kopjies. These have white walls and red roofs and many are executed in quite good taste and give the town a picturesque appearance. The general aspect of this part of the town reminds one very much of the environs of some of the Northern Italian towns. The inhabitants have been allowed to carry on as before, with certain limitations, so that beyond the burghers going about and the sentries posted on guard over some of the buildings, things are going on much as though nothing had happened....



General Louis Botha addressing civilians in Windhoek, shortly after South African troops occupied the town, 1915

On to Omaruru – the veld improves

23 June 1915. Wednesday. Omaruru.... The country through which we have come is a great improvement on the previous stretch. It is quite heavily wooded with thorn trees and stretches of grassy land here and there. All along the road we saw guinea fowls and pheasants in large numbers, while big game and bucks of various kinds are said to be plentiful. Omaruru is the name of the river on which the town is situated. Where it passes through the town there is a small stream of running water - the first

we have seen in this country. The town straggles along the banks and most of the houses have beautiful gardens, where everything grows luxuriantly. Date palms, orange trees and bamboos are the most conspicuous feature in the gardens, but all kinds of fruit and vegetable grow well for most months in the year....

26 June 1915. Saturday. Omaruru.... the latest news is that the Germans have split up and are going off in different directions. If this is so the end ought to be soon as our men will hunt them down soon.



South African troops fording a river in German South West, 1915

29 June 1915. Tuesday. Omaruru.... I have been endeavouring to get my transport completed, but found to my annoyance that nothing further had been done since we left Karibib. Maj. Russell who was left to act as ADMS spoke to me on the telephone yesterday and seems to take the view that as we got here all right, or rather somehow, nothing further need be done. This is very trying to put it mildly, and I have written and wired to Odlum that I must have better support, if not from him at any rate from his deputies. My orders were to have 6 GS wagons, 1 Ambulance wagon, 1 scotch cart, 1 water cart and 2 motors. At present I am reduced to 1 scotch cart!! Everything is the same. I am short in everything - blankets, pillows, sheets, towels, cups, plates, cutlery, cooking utensils, drugs. It is all the same. It is all very disheartening as we foresaw this and could have avoided it.

The Germans make their last stand

8 July 1915. Thursday. Otarifontein. Next day Sunday the motors came in and we got packed up and started away.... At midday we reached a delightful spot in a river bed. Here the country was splendid. Lovely grass in unlimited quantity and heaps of

game. While the kettle was boiling Nortje shot a steenbok and I a couple of pheasants. We rested here until our convoy caught us up at 3 pm, going on again we kept together until we got to Otjiwarongo spending a night on the road. Here I found ACH had trekked 2 days previously. We also heard that the whole German force was surrounded just outside Otari. We pushed on again until lunch time at 1 pm.

The country now was just a paradise for stock. Vast fields of lovely grass standing waist deep, lying in great glades in the surrounding bush. We saw one great Kudu bull about 600 yards away but as he did not offer a chance of a certain shot we did not fire. That night we camped again in beautiful country. Next morning we came on again and began to get into uncertain country as regards roads, and finally took to the railway and drove along the track....

The news was that the Germans had sent in for terms and an armistice had been declared from the previous day until 5 pm today. This morning we heard that General Myburgh not having heard of the armistice had advanced from the North to attack. The Germans sent out officers under the White flag. While the palaver was going on the officer carrying the flag, put it down and his comrades who were watching thought that something had gone wrong and fired on our troops, wounding one man. General Myburgh immediately gave the order to charge and in a few minutes our burghers dashed in and captured 500 Germans and their guns and released about 300 of our prisoners.

We also got news that General Brits, who is up near the Etoscha Panne had captured 200 Germans there in charge of the remainder of our prisoners. So now they are all liberated.

General Manie Botha has got to Grootfontein and has come in on the German main force, which is now surrounded and lying about 12 miles out. It now appears that negotiations have come to a head by the Home Government saying there must be unconditional surrender.¹⁵ The Germans have asked for a further extension till 7 p.m. Later. The Germans have asked for a further extension till 7 tonight and orders are out for everyone to stand to arms, ready to move out at a moment's notice. So things are quite exciting for the moment.

9 July 1915. Friday. This morning we heard that the negotiations had been going on through the night and that at 4 am the Germans had finally decided to surrender unconditionally....

Looking back on the final stages of the campaign

10 July 1915. Saturday.... I want now to turn back to the course of events during the final stages of the campaign. After the retreat of the Germans from Kalkfeld our forces moved after them with all speed. General Brits on the extreme left made for the Etoscha Panne, where the bulk of our prisoners were reported to be. The infantry went along the railway with the 5th. MB in advance while General Myburgh was trekking on the extreme right making straight for Grootfontein. We have not heard much of the adventures of the flanking forces but whatever happened they reached their destination so quickly that it is doubtful whether the Germans were aware of

their presence, until they found General Myburgh in possession of both Grootfontein and Tsumeb, the two terminals of the railway. The central forces after reaching Otjiwarongo had a stretch of 75 - 80 miles to traverse with only one waterhole at Okaputa leaving a final stretch of 50 miles without water, the Germans holding Otarifontein at the end of it. From Otjiwarongo the main road lies to the east of the railway while another one goes along the same route as this line.

Otarifontein lies between two ranges of hills running east and west. The road pierces this southern range and here we had news that the Germans had laid a huge mine 156 yards long with flanking mines, the whole containing 6,600 lbs of dynamite. Guns were posted on the hills and the main defence prepared to oppose a force entering by the main road. General Botha therefore sent a force of the S.A.M.R. to deploy along the main road, in mean time sending the main force to attack the Germans right flank along the railway. Both these forces had to march the intervening 50 miles at their best speed, and immediately attack on arrival. The Germans taken utterly by surprise when they found the main attack being delivered on their flank, fled after firing a few shots and were pursued by some of our mounted men until they fell back on this main position about 12 miles further back. The S.A.M.R. scouts going carefully came on the wires leading to the big mine and cut them and then following up the wires found and captured the 3 men whose duty it was to have fired the mine at the proper moment. In the desultory fighting that went on 8 Germans and 6 or 7 of our men were wounded, and several killed on both sides, 4 of ours I believe. The German main position is out on the Tsumeb line and here they found their retreat cut off by General Myburgh. I heard subsequently that when General Myburgh captured the 500 Germans and released our prisoners he also captured the main bulk of their supplies so that in a very short time the Germans found themselves in the hopeless position which led to their final surrender.

The whole thing has been a most brilliant piece of generalship which could only have been accomplished by troops capable of getting every ounce out of their animals without killing them in so doing, and men not afraid to face the prospect of fighting for their water after doing all this. I am told one of the first things Col. Francke asked General Botha, was what breed of animal he possessed capable of doing such wonderful trekking. The infantry too covered 50 miles in 36 hours which under the circumstances must be a record.

11 July 1915. Sunday. Otarifontein. I am gradually getting together a more connected account of the last fight, from various sources. I find from one of our wounded that he and some others who were pursuing the Germans and endeavouring to cut them off, got so far ahead that our guns mistook their dust for that made by the Germans and opened fire on them, killing one man and wounding 3 others. One poor fellow had his arm shattered by a shell, amputation being necessary. Today a train load of about 300 reservists was brought in. These men are to be given their parole and allowed to go back to their farms. The regulars - about 2000 or more - are being sent to Aus where they are to be interned. General Botha has been most magnanimous as he has allowed the regulars to surrender with "honours of war" which seems to mean that they will be allowed to go Aus carrying their rifles. All ammunition and big guns of course have to be given up. The reservists on arrival were detained in front of the hospital so that we have had a good view of their arrival. Most of them look very battered and dirty....

12 July 1915. Monday. Otarifontein. Late last evening another couple of train loads of prisoners arrived, about 500 bringing the total to 900 odd for the day. These are still the reservists. There are altogether so I found out officially last evening 4200 odd prisoners to come in. This seems a large number to surrender without putting up a single fight. However the end was inevitable whatever was done, so probably Col. Francke thought it was useless to throw away lives. I know General Botha is delighted beyond measure to have brought the campaign to a close with little loss of life on either side....

17 July 1915. Saturday. Otarifontein.... The settling up arrangements strike one as curious and quite in keeping with the rest of this wonderful campaign. The German regulars have not yet been taken over and remain in their camp with their arms and ammunition. In the meantime all the troops have been withdrawn, with the exception of a small force of S.A.M.B. and infantry, who are eventually to act as an escort to the prisoners. However I hear on good authority that Col. Francke is playing the game and faithfully carrying out all the terms of the surrender. The Germans are repairing the line from this end while we are working up from the south....

28 July 1915. Wednesday. Otarifontein. On Friday (23rd) I had to go up to Guchab, a place about half way up the line to Grootfontein for the gruesome purpose of investigating the truth of an assertion by some natives that one of their friends had been shot dead by the engineer in charge of a mine, about 3 weeks previously and just after the occupation of the place by our troops. I went in the car. The road lies in a long Kloof rising very gradually for about 25 miles until Guchab is reached, about 1000 feet above this place and therefore over 5000 feet above the sea level. Along the road we passed several Copper mines but none of them seem to be worked on a big scale. They all had the appearance of leading a very pottering existence.

I called in at the only farm that looked promising and found it belonged to a Dutchman called Venter. He was out shooting so I did not see him but spoke to his wife. She told me she had been born in the country (she appeared to be about 45). Her father's farm was at Noridas, near Swakopmund. What interested me immensely was that she told me that in the early days her father had about 3000 head of stock on this farm and that the veldt used to be splendid. At the present time it is an absolutely barren desert without a vestige of growth anywhere except just in the riverbed. She was most emphatic on the point that splendid grass used to grow not only in the river, but all over the veldt, which today is a howling wilderness of sand and rock....

Etosha Pan – a final bit of hunting

On his [Major Whitehead's, O.C. Ambulance train] arrival we made enquiries about the return of the train and found that there would be no engine available until Tuesday 27th. We arranged therefore to go for a shoot on the 26th. This time we decided to take the road for the Etoscha Panne and go out along it for about 20 miles or so and see what was to be got. So Nortje and I started away that same evening (25th) and trekked about 4 hours to a poort called Goab Pforte where we slept going on again early next morning. About 3 miles or more from the poort we passed a waterhole and deserted farm house and a mile or more on came to a low ridge of hills where we

decided to make our shooting camp. As soon as it was light we walked out along this ridge to view the country and try and spot some game. For miles around, the country was heavily wooded with occasional open glades, which we scanned closely with our glasses. The trees here were finer and different to what we had seen previously, mainly being very fine and tall. The foliage in many cases had taken on beautiful Autumn tints. Grass was deep everywhere in the open and even under the trees where they were not too densely packed. We had a most interesting walk for about 4 hours, but though we saw no end of evidence of the presence of gemsbok, kudu and hosts of small game, we were unfortunate in seeing nothing at all up to our return to camp about 11 am....

Korab near Tsumeb – inspecting the German position

4 August 1915. Wednesday. Tsumeb. Having got everything packed and ready to put on the train we decided yesterday to take the chance of running up to Tsumeb, meaning to return on the ambulance train the following morning. The journey was interesting as it took us through the German position near Korab, where they had intended making their last stand. About 10 miles from Otari the railway passes over a low ridge flanked by higher mountains on either side, the gap being about 1 mile across. The approach to the ridge was across a flat grassy plain quite devoid of cover. All along the ridge had been fortified with exchanges and gun emplacements while roads had been made in the rear leading to every part of the position so as to facilitate the movements of the ammunition carts and guns. Everything was marked out clearly with sign-boards showing where the roads led to. Out on the plain white crosses were placed to mark out the ranges. In this position they had placed 22 maxims and 34 big guns, for which latter they had 28,000 rounds of ammunition. The troops numbered something over 3000. As a matter of fact though the position was a strong one for a frontal attack, there would have been no very great difficulty in outflanking and attacking in rear.... Here also the military had their main Supply and Ordnance stores. They had made hurried efforts at wholesale destruction when they were cornered, but had not had time to do a great deal of damage. They managed however to burn a large quantity of rifle ammunition and burn large stacks of rifles, as well as some motor cars. They had also started to burn 4 field guns, but were interrupted before any damage was done. The Stores were filled with all sorts of equipment in large quantities, enough to have equipped our whole army efficiently.¹⁶...

10 August 1915. Tuesday. "Ebari" We got away from Tsumeb about midday on Thursday, picked up our sick at Otarifontein and did a most successful and rapid trip to Usakos.... got to Walvis late in the evening, embarking early the next morning on the Hospital Ship *Ebari*.



Dr Kenah Murray and van Coller (2nd & 1st from Right) in a military vehicle, Potchefstroom, 24 September 1915, shortly after their return from German South West

Endnotes

¹ Green Point Common, overlooking Table Bay and a mile or two from the centre of Cape Town, was where units of the South African military often camped in 1914-15 prior to being despatched to a particular theatre of the war.

² The South African forces were able to land unopposed here because Walfish Bay was an enclave on the South West African coast that belonged in international law to South Africa, having been annexed by the Cape Colony just before Imperial Germany seized the region.

³ It is important to note that the South African forces under General Botha were organised at this time into two, largely unintegrated types of unit. The commandos were volunteer units made up of mainly Boer (ie Afrikaner) farmers from the platteland. They were a continuation from the 19th century, and were much more informally organised and egalitarian in spirit than the other type of military force, the newly formed professional units of the South African Defence Force. Many of Kenah's criticisms of the way in which the South African forces conducted the takeover of German South West relate to his rather dismissive view of the commandos.

⁴ Kenah often uses the shorthand v.C. for his colleague, Van Coller, in the rest of the Diaries.

⁵ The First World War took place at a moment of fundamental change in modes of transport. Draught animals – which meant wagons and carts, mules and horses – were still dominant. Railways, of course, were already well established. But the motor vehicle was only just beginning to play a significant part. Kenah's Diaries over the 4-year period, 1914-18, show this transition dramatically, including the final displacement of mounted cavalry by the first armoured cars and tanks. The transition, however, took place unevenly. For example, while Kenah is on horseback only during the German South West African campaign in 1915, his cousin, Dr Ernest Anderson, who was serving with the Household Cavalry on the Western Front, kept his horse in France throughout the War!

⁶ Ie, the members of the South African commandos.

⁷ Kenah Murray had been at Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he did much of his medical training.

⁸ A South African guinea-pig-like animal, living in burrows, and frequently encountered on rocky kopjes and mountain slopes in Southern Africa.

⁹ According to Wikipedia, the handsome Northern Black Korhaan, or white-quilled bustard, is a variant of the Karoo Bustard.

¹⁰ Apart from this short spur built by the Germans for defensive purposes, there was only one significant railway in German South West Africa. It wound its way up from the coast on to the platteland at Windhoek. The South African forces by and large followed the line of rail in their campaign; and it is clear from Kenah's experiences, they only solved their logistical problems once they had brought the railway back into operation.

¹¹ Kameeldoring (camel thorn) trees.

¹² Literally, Thirst River Mouth.

¹³ Kenah means no South African soldiers were allowed into the town without permission. General Botha's treatment of the (white) civilian population and, indeed, of the professional German forces in South West Africa after their surrender, seems in marked contrast to what happened in France and Belgium during the War.

¹⁴ Commanding Officer.

¹⁵ Presumably, by 'Home Government', Kenah is referring to the British Government. It is fascinating that, at this early stage of the First World War, the Allies are demanding unconditional surrender of the German forces. Three and a half years later, the War had become so stalemated that the Allies accepted the German indefinite ceasefire offer in November 1918, and most of Germany was never occupied by Allied forces, unlike the wholesale takeover of its colonies in Africa.

¹⁶ Two things are striking about how the German colonial administration conducted the defence of South West Africa, both in contrast to the long drawn out defence of Germany's East African colony (modern-day Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi). First, it used only professional troops from home, supplemented by white (mainly German) settlers who were reservists. Unlike East Africa, it did not recruit soldiers from the indigenous population. And secondly, the Germans conducted a much more conventional posture of defending fixed positions, again in contrast to German East Africa where General von Lettow Vorbeck conducted a highly mobile, four-year long resistance to the combined South African-British attempt to conquer the colony. The fact that the German army had conducted a prolonged war against the Herero people, amounting to genocide, in South West Africa may have been a factor precluding any reliance on soldiers from the local population.